

Burlington's young English language learners: 'They are just little sponges'

Summer program gives children from around the world a chance to build English skills



Ten pre-schoolers sat in a semi-circle as their teacher Lis Zwick led them in a lesson on farm vocabulary.

They sang out the words “tractor,” “cheese” and “cow” and joined together to make a merry-sounding “moo-moo.”

Samir Dhakal, age 5, followed along happily even though the English language is new to him. His first language is Nepali and until February that’s all he spoke with his Bhutanese parents, who came to Burlington with assistance from the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Center.

The New Arrivals summer program at Burlington’s Sara Holbrook Community Center is designed to give Samir and other English

language learners a boost with their literacy skills as they prepare to start school or return to school in the fall.

This year, the non-profit Holbrook and partners including the Burlington public schools and Shelburne Farms are offering summer programs with an intensive focus on literacy at three locations for immigrant/refugee children in pre-school to middle school. The programs are free for qualifying families and wrap up this week.

Some of the students are recent arrivals, and others have been here for five years or more. The goal is to help all of them advance on the journey to academic fluency.

There are field trips to Shelburne Farms, arts and crafts and plenty of outdoor play time, as well as classroom programming with a heavy focus on literacy. At the pre-school level that translates to songs, conversation, rhymes, and read-a-loud to build up vocabulary.

“It’s using as many words as we can and encouraging them to use them back,” said Leisa Pollander, executive director of Sara Holbrook.

The programs are popular with parents including Som Dhakal, Samir’s father. He was a math and science teacher back in Nepal, holds a bachelor’s degree and speaks some English. Even with an educated background, it’s been difficult for him to transition to the workplace in a new country and new language.

“Here everything depends on paperwork,” Som Dhakel said with a sigh. “It’s a bit difficult for us to understand the paperwork.”

His wife works at a nursing home and he’s working as a night-shift cleaning supervisor while he sorts out what education and certifications he might need to be a teacher here.

“The system is totally new for us,” he said. “But anyway — I like this place.”

The pre-school has been good for Samir, who will start kindergarten in the fall, he said. It’s allowed him to make friends and sample American foods at breakfast and snack — foods that taste very different from the rice and vegetable-based meals the family is accustomed to. Watching Samir eat a Sun chip from a bag after class, his father smiled at the boy’s expanding palate.

“Before, he would not take that.”

Samir does not say much in English, but he understands many words and knows his ABC’s, his father said. Back in Nepal, Samir accompanied his father to school every day. “Along with me he used to go,” Som Dhakal said. “From three years of age, he started going to school.”

Som Dhakel is determined that one day his son will graduate from high school and go to college.

“He must go to college, for further education, to be himself a bona fide person,” Som Dhakel said.

Sara Holbrook has been helping immigrants find their way since it was founded in Burlington 75 years ago. In the beginning, the non-profit offered assistance to families of Irish, Italian, German and French-Canadian heritage. Over the decades, it has helped families from Vietnam, Bosnia, Sudan, Somalia, Congo and Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and other countries.

The number of English language learners in the Burlington school system has grown to almost 500 and includes students from all over the

world. Most of the participants in the Sara Holbrook New Arrivals summer program are Burlington residents, although some ELL students from neighboring communities also participate. The middle school program is taking place at Hunt Middle School and the grade school program is based at the Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes, a short walk from Sara Holbrook Center.

In a classroom at the Sustainability Academy, teacher Deena Murphy helped 8-year-olds Law Wah Moo and Rubin Upreti memorize their sight words — words that are essential to spoken and written English. The boys chuckled and cheered as the teacher made a game of the work, giving each of them a point for every word they quickly recognized. As the boys flipped through homemade flash cards with words such as “on,” “upon,” “draw,” and “many,” another child one table over, 9-year-old Angkith Pradhan, a recent arrival from Nepal, pulled small book after small book from his desk, delighting in each line he read aloud and calling out, “Done!” after he finished the stack.

Down the hall, 11-year-old Mohamed Awayle worked alongside other students on a geography project about Egypt. At home, he speaks Somalian with his father, Mai-Mai with his mother and English with his sister. He wants to be a basketball or soccer player someday and said the best thing about the New Arrivals summer program is “studying about other countries.”

For Murphy, the teacher, the progress children make is inspiring. “They are just soaking it up. They want to be there, they want to have the help. ... They are just little sponges.”

In addition to summer programs, Sara Holbrook runs a full slate of programs during the school year, including after school and evening programs for teens. It’s been rewarding to see youngsters grow up, learn English and succeed, said Pollander.

Alumni include Ahmed Foco, a 32-year-old systems analyst who came to Burlington as a 14-year-old Bosnian refugee in the 1990s. He participated in Sara Holbrook teen programs and later worked part-time for the organization.

He remembers doing his homework at the center with students from Bosnia, Vietnam and other countries. “It gave us a really fun and safe environment,” he said in a telephone interview from his current home in California.

He graduated from Burlington High School in 1998 and earned a degree in mathematics and computer science from the University of Vermont in 2003. He now lives and works in Sacramento and is earning a master’s degree in business.

His advice to English language learners: “Immerse yourself. It’s very easy to kind of just stick with your own and be in a safe environment. What really helps with any sort of language learning is to immerse yourself in the people and the culture.”

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